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Taking Madness off the Shelf

Rose Miyatsu

If there is one thing I think that a person can learn about me by looking at my bookshelves, it is that I am completely and utterly mad. The words “madness” and “mental illness” pop up again and again on the spines of my books, proudly announcing that perhaps their owner has something a bit wrong with her head. *The Age of Madness* and *The Myth of Mental Illness* by Thomas Szasz, *Women and Madness* by Phyllis Chesler, and of course Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*, sit next to multiple texts on famous asylums, the history of psychiatric care, and the persecution of the mentally ill/disabled. These loony volumes and my accompanying collection of texts on disability theory have changed my perception of what it means to think differently, and allowed me to feel a sense of pride in belonging to a set of people that Foucault once charmingly referred to as “my little mad ones, my little excluded ones, my little abnormal,”¹ but these mostly theoretical texts are not where my collection of books on madness began. Initially when I sought to connect with abnormal minds through books, it was through fiction.

My collection began over ten years ago with a search for community. I knew that I was what most people would deem “mentally ill” from the time I was twelve or thirteen, but I was taught to regard this term with a sense of revulsion, and directly forbidden from ever saying anything that might hint that my mind fell outside of the acceptable range of “normal.” Believing myself to be alone in the real world, I retreated into a world of fiction. I began stealing books from my father’s bookshelf, where I discovered four long novels and a number of shorter works by Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. After rapidly reading through everything by Dostoevsky that

¹ Quoted in Huffer, Lynne. *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory*. Columbia University Press, 2010.

my father owned, I felt such a deep connection to these books and the psychological portraits of madness that Dostoevsky painted that I knew I had to have my own copies. I purchased a miniature hard cover edition of *Crime and Punishment* with gilded pages to start off my collection, and although it was rather inexpensive, it remains one of my favorite pieces. I then slowly began buying up works by Tolstoy, Chekhov, and other Russian novelists whose descriptions of madness and despair drew me in.

It was not until I discovered Steinbeck and Faulkner and their very different descriptions of mentally ill and disabled characters that I finally began adding American novels to my collection. My initial interest in these two authors quickly evolved into an obsession with the rather numerous works of post-WWI American literature that described mental illness, asylums, shock treatments, and lobotomies in bitter detail. I sympathized with characters who were locked up or tortured or made to feel inferior for their mental deviance, but it was not until I began reading and collecting works such as *Girl, Interrupted* and *The Bell Jar*, in which fiction mixes with autobiography, that I finally began to think in concrete terms of a community of real madmen and women outside of the world of fiction. I soon began collecting the works of authors whose biographies indicated that they were as mad as I was, such as Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Kurt Vonnegut, taking pride in their accomplishments as mentally ill artists.

When given the choice, I have always preferred to find older, used editions of these fictional works for my collection. I love the way these old books feel and smell, and owning something that once belonged to someone else strengthens my sense of connection with other readers who I like to imagine identified with them in the same way. This is especially true of one book in particular in my collection. Prominently displayed on the top of the same bookshelf that holds all of my nonfiction accounts of madness is a beautifully illustrated paperback edition of C.S.

Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*. This retelling of the myth of Psyche and Cupid has been one of my favorite books since I first read it in middle school, but this particular edition did not enter into my collection until I was about to leave home for college. It was given to me, rather dismissively, by my parents, who had found it in a box of books that had once belonged to my late uncle. Whenever I hold this book, I feel a connection with the main character and her struggle for identity in the midst of her despair and remorse, but I feel an even stronger connection to the man who owned it before me. The uncle who it belonged to committed suicide when I was very young, and although my family rarely talks about him, I have thought of him frequently throughout the periods of my own madness. This book, the only former possession of his that I own, is a constant reminder that someone close to me struggled with many of the same mental issues that I continue to struggle with. In the periods during my undergraduate years when I felt most frustrated with my madness, I would pick up this book and find comfort in knowing that there were other people in the world whose minds sometimes ventured to the dark regions of insanity, both people I loved, and people I never knew but whose words remain etched in the classical texts I collect. That knowledge was sometimes all I needed to turn my disgust with my supposedly diseased mind into pride.

The beautiful stained glass style illustration on the delicate cover of *Till We Have Faces* make it appear somewhat out of place among some of my more sinister-looking books that feature asylums and straight jackets and jagged fonts on the covers, but this book more than any of the others perfectly encapsulates what my book collection is to me- the markings of a community of people who think and feel like me. It is a way of making connections across time with people both living and dead, fictional and real. These are the connections that I continue to make as a graduate student studying the mad characters in literature that have always fascinated me and engaging in

academic conversations with others who, like myself, pride themselves in being just a little abnormal.

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